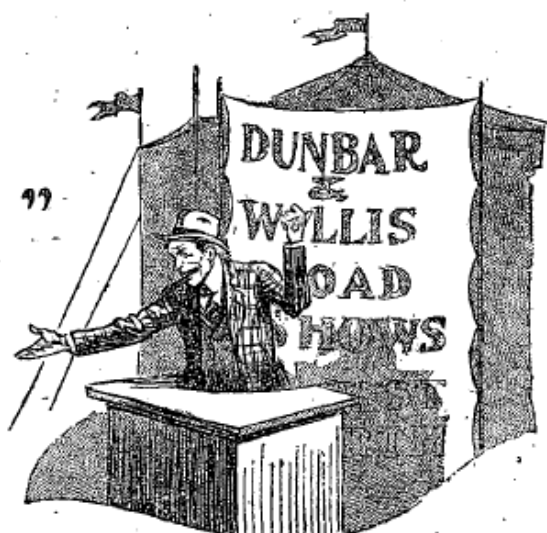


"Such a Liar!"

by Miriam Michelson



HE bustled in upon Dunbar one day when our show was about to leave for the West.

"I want to be your press-agent, old sport," he said briskly.

"Got one," growled the old man, and turned his back on him.

"Ha!" The exclamation was emphasized by a thumping slap on the manager's lean shoulder. "But you ain't got me, my love."

The old man turned, and, as soon as he had his breath, he said things. They were confused, ill-assorted things, hastily expressed, but Dunbar has been running circuses for thirty years now, and no one is ever in doubt as to what he means. He finished by repeating the youngster's sentence with variations.

"No, we ain't got ye—yet," he said as though he was biting chains. "But we'll get ye, Johnny, and powder ye so fine they won't know ye're meat when we feed ye to the jackals. Now, will you get out quick?"

"Nary," declared the youngster with a laugh.

His voice might have been fathered by a bass drum and mothered by a steam calliope; its gentlest note was a bellow that would make an Arizona burro envious, and when he wanted really to make himself heard, the megaphone barkers outside the entrance just naturally declined to argue the matter.

"Nary a jackal-meat party you get out o' Billy Burns," he went on, "he's too val-

uable—too valuable to you, dear old friend!"

He tapped Dunbar pleasantly on the chest, and the old man glowered blacker than thunder clouds.

With his pepper-and-salt hair, his long, thin nose, and his yellow-gray eyes too close together, Dunbar looks like the leader of that pack of gray wolves we got from Alaska. Most folks don't care to annoy 'em. But this fresh-faced fellow had the gall of a short-tailed monkey that started one day while on parade to guy Bildiz, the black tiger.

"You can't afford it, deary," he went on, and his brass-band voice boomed through the tent. "Smart advertisers come too high. But I'll come to you—as press agent, not jackal hash—for just twenty per cent less than the cardboard faker you've got costs you. He gets two hundred per; I'll get one-sixty. You'll get double the value on the money you pay me, and the twenty per cent rake-off besides."

"H-m!" coughed the old man. His cough was a sneer, just like the gray wolf's. But clipping wages was his passion; he'd dream nights of all-round reductions and wake good-natured, scheming to make his dream come true.

"Yes," nodded the youngster encouragingly. "Perhaps you'd like to know the name of your new press-agent. Here!"

He scratched a few words in the corner of a card and tossed it complacently down on the desk. It read, "Hustling Billy

Burns." A line had been drawn through the Novelty Theater, and he had hastily written in the corner Press-Agent Dunbar & Willis's Road Shows.

Old Dunbar's heavy-lidded yellow eyes lighted on it and turned away. There was about as much encouragement in his leathery face as in my old camel Josephine's, when the gentlemen of her party think they're particularly entertaining.

But d'you think that feezed Hustling Billy? He just waited. Yep, waited there while the old man humped over at his desk pretended to get busy; and his attitude was easy and confident, with the cheerfulest smile in the world on his shovel-mouthed, shining face.

That way of waiting fetched Dunbar. You don't meet too many folks that can wait that quiet, sure way. Most of 'em can't camouflage when it comes to just shutting up and sitting still.

"So you think you're a better man than Meadows, eh?" the old man sneered.

"Oh, child!" exclaimed Billy softly (as softly as he knew; his tunes were all played with the hard pedal), and he spread out his hands like one too fastidious to praise himself, and too plaguey sure of himself to deign to be insulted.

The old man chuckled. He was lost.

"But why twenty per cent less?" he asked.

The youngster unbuttoned the top button of his coat and relaxed. I've seen Juana, the lioness, relax just that way when her meat's in sight; she'll raise the dead with her howls at feeding time till she sees me coming, but once she's sure I'm there she don't trouble any more. Neither did Billy. He drew his chair up to the desk with the air of a man that belongs, and said earnestly, "Because of Meg Mintar."

The old man stared. "Meg who? Oh, McIntyre. What's she got to do with it?"

"Is her sure-enough name McIntyre?" roared Billy. "Fine! Well, I love her, you know. Mad about her. Dead stuck on her. Down an' out. Bowled over. Clean gone on Meg McIntyre; that's me!"

Out in our tent, where his howls penetrated, we animal trainers broke into a guffaw he must have heard.

Dunbar stared at him harder than ever. "Do you happen to be crazy?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes—yes, deary. Clean daffy I am about a brown-haired circus girl with a fresh, country face, hard, red cheeks like Spitzenburgs, jolly brown eyes, and legs—legs that can outleap, outjump, outhurdle anybody that I ever saw under a tent—or anywheres else."

"H-m!" sneered Dunbar. "So that—"

"Exactly," cut in Billy.

"I never thought much about McIntyre," said the old man dreamily.

"And you needn't bother to commence now, my lamb," interrupted the youngster hotly. "I'll do all that's necessary in that line."

"All right," he said. "Get busy and see what you can do."

"I will," said Billy, "both ways. You watch me."

He was worth watching. For he strutted straight across the ring like a plump little yacht in a favoring breeze, white vest nicely bellied out, hands in hind-pockets, and singing at the top of his lungs, to the woman's dressing-tent. 'Twas a din to drive a brass foundry mad with envy. It got on the nerves of Balaam, our trick ass; he opened his head and let out a zigzag accompaniment that seemed to make the canvas fill and fall like a bellows. And the thing Billy sang—a medley of all the rag-choruses you ever heard with their tunes in one red burial blent, and Meg Mintar's name for the refrain!

No wonder the girls came running out. (It was the half-hour before the afternoon's performance.) Meg came with them and stood staring, a strong, high-colored young thing; no rouge there; she used to say she would give a week's pay to any one who'd invent a whitewash that'd stay on.

"What ails ye, little boy?" cries Meg, buttoning the last button of her blouse.

"You—you, Meg McIntyre—you!" he sang, rushing up to her, arms outstretched.

"Get Harry, the beast doctor, to prescribe for ye quick, so you can stop howling," said she, dodging.

"There's only one medicine in the whole world will do that!" he cried.

"An' that?" she demanded, arms a-kimbo.

"Not that—this!" he yelled, and took it in a flash from her lips.

Then whack! Her hand shot out, and his ears went red under the deft rat-tat she beat on them. He ducked and belowed and she ran into the dressing-tent. He followed, but the girls wouldn't have a bull like that charging about the tidy place. Besides, it was against the rules.

After that we were not unprepared for the kind of courtship he put up. He howled love speeches at Meg across the ring; it didn't matter whether a performance was on or not, he megaphoned tender messages. Whenever he came in from work (and he could work) we'd hear him singing about her in a tuneless monotone before he'd got to the vacant lots; my one-horned rhinoceros might have sung like that if he had stuck up his nose out of the mud and suddenly decided to go in for grand opera.

Of course he got the men stirred up about her. When Bildiz, the tiger, begins to roar out love things, there isn't a male creature in its cage but gets the fever. Even big, blond, lazy Hempey, who does trapeze with Pauline Percival, opened his sleepy eyes on Meg. But Pauline was jealous, and Meg, though bold-tongued, had the clean woman's scorn for the sleek gambler Hempey was—the sleek lover, the sleek, selfish, handsome brute male.

It was great fun for her, though, to have one man forever bellowing love to her, and half the others attracted, excited by his howls. Grunwald, the clown, took to burlesquing Billy in the ring; but how could one burlesque a brazen, grinning boy who clowned it himself in the openest fashion? Meg throve under the courtship, got prettier, jauntier, saucier, stepped more proudly, held her head higher. The same thing happens when my pet cock-pheasant's love-making turns his mate's head. Every time Meg and Billy came within shouting distance there were fireworks, vaudeville.

"What made ye put that thing in the paper about me?" she demanded of him once with wrath that was only half-real.

"What thing?" he howled back. "That for love, just for pure love of you, Meg

Mintar, Mr. Billy Burns, the twenty-thousand-a-year press-agent of Dunbar & Willis's Road Show, left his happy home an' ran away wid the circus?"

She nodded.

"Well, didn't he?" demanded Billy, coming closer.

"He left a life of luxury," she quoted. "The only son and heir of a fi-nancier—dropped all his college-work—it near broke his ambitious father's heart! Oh me, oh my, the poor young fellah!"

He grinned. "Oh, that part! That's fairy tales, my soul. But you're the particular person, to expect more'n half a poor press-agent's lie to be true. And the other part's true, Meg, so very true that—"

She interrupted. "Then it's lonesome it must be—the one little truth in a pack of lies."

"Not little, Meg," he protested; "big—immense! As for the pack of lies, they're a profitable pack, worth twice what Dunbar pays for 'em."

"Likely!" she said with a sniff. "If that's the case why don't ye get some one else to pay ye what ye earn?"

"'Cause no one else has got Meg Mintar in his show." He was at her elbow now. "When we're married, sweetness, you'll stop work, and I'll quit Dunbar and make double what I do now."

"What a long time ye'll have to wait for a raise," she said over her shoulder as she turned from him.

He giggled.

"I know it 'll seem long to you, Meg," he began consolingly, but the temper in her glance stopped him. "What makes ye think it 'll be long?" he inquired almost casually.

"Oh, sumpin' tells me so," she said airily, walking away.

"Don't believe it. It's a liar like the rest of us. I'll marry you, Meg, before the summer's done."

"Ye will? Ye will!"

"Sure. Dollars to doughnuts," he shouted gaily, and left her on the run, for he'd got an idea, and a hustler's ideas are worth money.

The next day there was a piece in the paper that told how Hustling Billy Burns,

the son of a prominent Western railroad and mine owner, who had run away from college romantically to follow the circus, was engaged to marry Meg Mintar, of Dunbar & Willis's Road Show. He had met her first, the paper said, at one of those trials of skill which Meg Mintar's magnificent hurdling had called forth at every college town the circus visited, when athletes were put on their mettle by this celebrated girl jumper. Billy Burns, the crack vaulter of his class, had met and been ingloriously downed by Hurdling Meg, and his heart had immediately acknowledged her as champion in another field. The marriage would take place before fall.

Meg boiled at that. She stormed down to the newspaper office to contradict it and to say sundry things about the "impudence of smart young press-agents." The contradiction was published the next day with a picture of Meg in her knickers and blouse, a bonny, trim young thing, taking a hurdle like a thoroughbred.

This was followed, of course, by a manly little interview with Hustling Billy in the evening paper; he held stanchly to the truth of the original tale, but, declared Billy to the sympathetic reporter, the premature and unauthorized announcement of the engagement had so offended Miss Mintar that, to his unspeakable sorrow, she had broken her troth. For his part, he would be faithful till death.

That wasn't the end of Billy's scheme; an idea with him works overtime and seven days in the week. There appeared in the paper another picture of Meg in simple, country-maiden style. (Billy had stolen it from the trunk-top which circus girls use for a dressing-table.)

Miss Mintar was a convent-bred young lady, the new story went, of aristocratic parentage; she had joined the circus at a fabulous salary upon the failure of her father, who had been a wealthy grain merchant. Miss Mintar was invariably carefully chaperoned by a widowed aunt, and it was her intention ultimately to return to that lady's home, after paying up her father's liabilities, there to teach physical culture and particularly the science of hurdling.

It was this last statement that started trouble; this, and the hipless, snug, short-skirt craze. For first thing you know, stout lady-swells of the city were coming down to the show and Miss Mintar was giving 'em physical culture, and making money, I tell you.

They came gingerly at first, and only the most forward ones; a tittering and exclaiming as though they were lost in Timbuktu and couldn't get used to us natives. But by and by they got cheekier and cheekier, like the monkeys do if you don't use your whip for every offense; and soon it was Miss Mintar here and Miss Mintar there, as bold as brass, bringing men dandies with 'em, and trailing round as though they owned the place, and all with that air of being within their rights, and diligently virtuous, and quite unconscious of criticism, that only females can put on.

It was the most strenuous course soft, fine ladies ever were put through, believe me. Meg was no lazy-bones, and she took her teaching seriously. But it was the most curious side-show ever attached to a circus, to have a purring lot of automobiles stopping outside Meg's little tent.

And then, the very night we left for the South, something happened. The girls whispered it at first. No, I think Billy printed it in one of the papers; but that was before it was true. When it did become true, and Hustling Billy heard of it, he rushed shouting to Meg's tent.

She was standing out in front beside a limousine in which sat a dame of many chins, corseted like a swollen beetle, and locked in a satin gown so scant she could hardly breathe. Both of 'em frowned at Billy, and Meg said, in the very tone she'd caught from the skin-tight cylinder in the car, "Pardon me, Mr. Burns, but at present I am engaged."

It was really an excellent imitation, but Billy didn't appreciate it. Before the lady's motor had rolled away he caught Meg by both hands.

"'Tain't true, Meg McIntyre, 'tain't true?" he begged.

She caught her hands from him and held them behind her. "What ain't?" she asked, chin in the air.

"You're not quitting the show to stay here with these stuffed swells an' train 'em down?"

"You wrote it yourself an' put it in the paper; you ought to know if it's true or not," said the haughty Miss Mintar.

But I happen to know she wasn't so haughty as she tried to make him believe; she was only spoiled—what circus girl wouldn't be?—by all that nonsense of Billy's, and the swells' attention and their dollars had turned her head.

"Oh, I say, honey," he coaxed, "don't break up the family! What's to become of yours truly?"

She shrugged. 'Twas a trick she'd caught from Mrs. Jim Carey-Layton, old money-bags Layton's wife, leader of the town's fast young set. It riled Billy.

"Hey, Meg," he shouted, "whatever you do don't learn things from Mrs. Layton! She's the worst mixture of U. S. millions and French frocks and gutter-blood tastes. Compared to her, Pauline Percival is an angel. We all know what Hempey's Pauline is, but Mrs. Jim Carey-Layton, she's—she's—Phew!" He whistled, despairing of putting his estimate of the lady in words.

The blood burned in Meg's cheeks. She flushed so hard you wouldn't notice her usual high color for a second. It makes a decent girl that knows life blush to hear such disgust for a woman in a man's voice.

"Don't get in with that crowd, old girl," begged Billy. "Those swells have got cold little stones where their hearts ought to be; they'll use you, they'll play with ye a little while to please their lazy, idle selves with somethin' new, and then in a jiffy they'll drop ye. I'd rather trust ye to Harry's tigers; they'd only eat you alive, but those cruel, dainty, selfish beauties in the Carey-Layton set—Meg, 'tain't because—say, are you a snob?"

He asked it hesitatingly like one in doubt, which was a mistake. You mustn't say, "Are you a snob?" to a woman. You must put it, "You're not a snob!" For then, though she won't believe you, of course, knowing herself one, she'll think you believe yourself, and there's nothing in the world a female loves so much as that

some man should think her better than she knows herself to be.

Meg didn't answer. She dropped her big old cape—it was just before she went out into the ring for her last turn—and stood a second in her little blue knickers, like a schoolgirl in a gym suit, but straight and sturdy and supple as only a professional can.

"Meg—Meg," Billy insisted, "you ain't fool enough to think they'll treat a circus girl like she was one o' themselves!"

That settled it.

"Never you mind whether I'm a fool or not. But I'll thank ye, Mr. Burns," she said, turning on the icy arctic stop, "not to put anything more about me in the papers; my pupils don't like it."

And out she ran. He bellowed after her. Catch Hustling Billy stopping his love-making for a little matter like an audience of two thousand! But she wouldn't listen to him.

It was a doleful hustler we carried off with us on our Southern circuit. And it was a mighty grumpy Dunbar that kept snapping at him all the way down.

The old man was furious at Meg's quitting. A short time previous—before Billy struck the circus—he wouldn't have known or cared if she had gone; but Billy's newspaper notices had made her an attraction that meant dollars in the box.

Dunbar's snarls, though, put the youngster on his mettle, and my camel Josephine! the fairy stories he did weave. He was the busiest young liar, flitting from one of us to the other, dressing us up in his yarns, till we didn't know each other or our very selves. But, just the same, his heart wasn't in it. He could write pretty fibs about Pauline Percival or Lollita, the equestrienne—whose name is Calkins; or about me being a philosopher, and my music for the beasts; or even about gruesome Redler, the contortionist—a human tarantula, that fellow! But Billy's stubby pencil was always aching to spell out the name of Meg Mintar.

He did write to her we knew, for before he sent his letters off, he would read 'em at the top of his lungs to the crowd of us. He would read her answers, too. But Lord

knows how much of what he read was true; he was so used to romancing, he couldn't bear to tell just plain facts.

Still there must have been something to all that rigmarole he gave us. I suppose Meg was in society, in a way. It may be the swells did take her up as a fad and sort o' run after her. There's no doubt that she did go to Mrs. Hervey's ball and wear a rig the papers described; one o' the dames must have given it to her, when she got tired of it. And perhaps at Mrs. Carey-Layton's party at the swagger country clubhouse, her vicious brat of a son (by one of her other husbands) did drive Meg out in his runabout and Meg did hurdle it, from a jumping board—a record-breaking feat.

Hustling Billy gave us all of this, but I noticed he got peevish when Meg's letters spoke too often of young Carey-Layton. We had known the lad by sight. He used to haunt our tents, and once he got into a row with Hempey over Pauline.

Hempey could have broken him over his knee. He was the sort of son his mother deserved, but Billy didn't take any comfort out of the fact that Mrs. Carey-Layton had him. Neither did anybody else.

I wasn't surprised to find that the show was headed North and that we were to give a return performance in a certain good circus town where Miss Mintar was just then doing the grand in high life. Billy's sighs in themselves were enough to blow us northward; but how he had magic enough to convince the old man that 'twas good business to go back there, was a wonder. Maybe he did promise to lasso Meg and get her back to the ring. But that wasn't what happened.

We struck the town one night at nine forty-five; at ten there wasn't any trace of Billy, and by the time tents were up everybody under canvas had heard that he'd made a bee-line for the upper town.

Of course, we all knew the sequel soon. Billy bellowed the news to us some time after midnight.

"Wedding bells! Wedding bells! It's wedding-bells for me!" he sang.

We were turned in for the night and every tent dark. But Billy had something

to say and, as soon as he could wake his audience, he began saying it.

He had found her in a shabby little lodging, that didn't match the picture she'd been drawing for Billy's benefit, curled up on a broken-sprunged lounge. She had sprained her ankle weeks before and, for lack of the right care, it was in a bad way.

"But Mrs. Carey-Layton sent me her own doctor—oh, a howling swell in a sable overcoat!—as soon as she heard of the accident," Meg cried to him eagerly on the heels of her explanations.

"Noble kind of her," said Billy.

"Yes, and Mrs. Hervey wanted to move me to a swagger hospital, but of course I wouldn't accept it."

"Course not," said Billy, down on his knees before the choked grate, trying to blow life into the stingy little fire.

"And—and young Carey-Layton sends me flowers every day," bragged Meg, shivering and pulling the torn cover up about her. "I just threw the last ones out a minute before you came."

Billy dropped the fire-irons with a clang.

"An' Miss Guiberson does send me such good things to eat—lobster 'n' ice-cream 'n' duck 'n'—" Meg's voice broke. She was mortal hungry. She couldn't keep it up.

Billy turned quickly. She was lying, a gaunt, shaking little heap, sobbing into her pillow.

He had her in his arms then in a minute, and she nuzzled her head into his shoulder, as though she'd found out what balm o' Gilead and the long, vacation mixed might feel like.

"Oh, Billy," she sobbed, "'t isn't true, not a word of it! Even before that bad little boy, Carey-Layton, wanted to marry me and they sent him away and all of them turned against me and wouldn't take lesson any more; they never treated me like anything but a—a plaything or a servant. But I was a fool an' thought they might some day. Such a fool! I just had to brag, I was so miserable an' lonesome an' hard-up. Billy, dear, I'm such a liar!"

"I know, chicken-child," he bellowed, joyously rocking her in his arms. "So'm I."